

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

CHAPTER I

CATHERINE'S HIDDEN LIFE

" Sopraattare alle paasioni ed atti di tanta gioventudine pare alcuno parlare fabaloso." —Dante, *Vita Nuova*, § 2.

"O stupor ! O admiratio ! O Inaudita a seculis nostris familiaritas ! oatenaiol!" — Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda*, § in.

CATERINA BENINCASA, whom we now call Saint Catherine of Siena, was born on March 25, 1347—the Feast of the Annunciation, which, according to Florentine and Sienese reckoning, was the first day of the new year. It was one hundred and twenty years since Saint Francis had died at Assisi in the arms of Lady Poverty, his mystical bride, and a quarter of a century since Dante had passed away in exile at Ravenna, again to behold Beatrice in the empyrean heaven of which he sang. These two men are Catherine's elder brothers in the spirit; the seraphic Father of Assisi, Standard-bearer of the Crucified, as the voice in the high vision on La Verna had hailed him, is her predecessor in the mystical life ; she is the successor of the poet of the *Divina Commedia* in the history of religious thought in Italy.

Of her contemporaries, Francesco Petrarca was then nearly forty-three years old. Crowned six years before as poet laureate on the Capitol, he was now the literary dictator of Italy, but, in the year of Catherine's birth, was back in his Provencal home at Vacluse, fighting with the Naiads (as he poetically puts it) who had destroyed his garden on the bank of the Sorgue during his long absence across the Alps. It was probably in this very year that he finished the first part of his *Canzoniere* for Madonna Laura with the sonnet " Arbor vittoriosa, triunfale," and he was about to open the second, nobler and more spiritual series of lyrics with the sublime canzone, " I' vo pensando " : " For, with death at my side, I seek a new rule for my life, and I see the *I*